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OBSERVATIONS

ON THE CONDUCT OF HE

PROTESTANT DISSENTERS.

BRITISH MUSEUM

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PROTESTANT DISSENTERS.

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BRITISH MUSEUM

TO THE

RIGHT REVEREND FATHER IN GOD,

GEORGE,

LORD BISHOP OF LINCOLN.

My Lord,

IN offering the following pages to your Lordſhip's protection, I have been influenced by a double motive;—a profound perſonal

perſonal eſteem, — and a knowledge of your firm attachment to the principles and welfare of the *National Church*, of which you are a pillar and an ornament. Induced ſolely by a ſimilar attachment to obtrude my ſentiments on the public, and encouraged by an ardent wiſh to ſtimulate abler pens to ſupport the cauſe I have brought forward, I flatter myſelf I ſhall obtain that indulgence from your Lordſhip's candour which I cannot venture to hope from your judgment. Common juſtice to your Lordſhip requires that I ſhould declare, I have publiſhed without conſulting or communicating with you upon the ſubject. I ſhould be extremely unwilling to involve in my errors a *name*, which I, in common with the public, hold in

the

the higheſt reſpect. I have the honour to be,

My Lord,

Your Lordſhip's

moſt dutiful,

and moſt obedient ſervant,

The AUTHOR.

OBSERVATIONS

ON THE CONDUCT OF THE

PROTESTANT DISSENTERS.

THE preſent age is diſtinguiſhed by liberality of ſentiment, and a ſpirit of toleration. This is one of the many advantages ariſing from the general diffuſion of knowledge. When learning and philoſophy have cultivated the mind, it riſes ſuperior to the narrow reſtraints of prejudice, and diſdains the feeble policy of extorting apparent conſent to any particular ſyſtem, by real coercion. Of all outrages of bigotry and deſpotiſm, thoſe are moſt juſtly and moſt generally reprobated which are levelled againſt religion, and affect to exerciſe dominion over the conſciences of men. The care of his ſoul is a concern of too much importance to every individual, who is capable of thinking and reflecting, to be entruſted to any other hands but his own. When his opinions on that ſubject are once formed, and

eſtabliſhed on the baſis of conviction, neither the menaces of authority, nor the dread of puniſhment, can affect his deciſion. They may induce him, indeed, to conceal thoſe ſentiments which it would not be prudent to avow:—but the right of opinion is a natural right, and cannot be ſuperſeded by any human tribunal. It is to God alone that we are reſponſible for our religious tenets; and nothing but the moſt extravagant exceſs of arrogance could induce one fallible being to dictate to another on a ſubject, where error may be fatal, and both may be wrong. But in civil matters, the caſe is widely different. Every body of men, that has framed itſelf into a ſociety, has a clear and indiſputable right to eſtabliſh certain rules, to be obſerved by all thoſe who are willing to be admitted into it. An aſſent to ſome particular mode of faith, a concurrence in ſome particular religious rites, is perhaps the beſt and moſt effectual bond that can be deviſed for civil union. Whether the ſyſtem adopted be right or wrong, is a matter of no political conſequence. It is ſufficient for all the purpoſes of government, that the members of the eſtabliſhment believe it to be right. Thoſe who entertain different opinions, can have no reaſon to complain, while they are allowed the free exerciſe of private judgment, and permitted to worſhip the Supreme Being in that way which they conceive to be moſt worthy of him, and of themſelves.

ſelves. In the infinite diverſity of religions, which the Creator has permitted to prevail in the world, the majority of voices muſt influence government in their choice. They can be determined by no other criterion. Supported by ſuperior numbers, diſſenſion becomes eſtabliſhment; and eſtabliſhment without that aid ſinks into diſſenſion.

In the ſeries of revolutions by which this country has been diſtracted, the national religion has changed with the times: it has at different periods been Catholic, Preſbyterian, and Epiſcopal. It is the nature of thoſe in power to demand ſubmiſſion; of thoſe who are not in power to claim indulgence. The real principles of a party, like the real character of an individual, can never be thoroughly known till it is inveſted with authority. It is no uncommon caſe for thoſe, who when ſtruggling againſt ſuperior force have diſplayed the meekneſs of apoſtles, and the fortitude of martyrs, to change their characters as they change their ſituation. When they had openly poſſeſſed themſelves of that power, for which they had long ſecretly ſighed, the mild apologiſts of toleration have been transformed into furious, unrelenting and ſanguinary bigots. In their turn they have erected the ſcaffold, and lighted the pile: they have revelled in all the infernal horrors of religious perſecution. It will be unneceſſary to look abroad for the cruel

proofs of this aſſertion. Our domeſtic hiſtory furniſhes us with ample teſtimony to the fact. And facts, taken from domeſtic hiſtory, have a double advantage: they intereſt the feelings, and are eaſily aſcertained. The horrors which have been experienced in a remote period, and a diſtant country, affect the mind but feebly in compariſon with thoſe which have been recently felt, and felt at home. From the former we may flatter ourſelves that we are exempted by local ſituation, or peculiar circumſtances; from a repetition of the latter, we know that nothing but our own vigilance can protect us.

Every religious ſect has a ruling principle, which however artfully concealed, while the members of it are condemned to obſcurity and ſubmiſſion, breaks forth with added vigour when they are enabled to ſeize the reigns of government. That ſect of chriſtians, which is at preſent called the Church of England, whatever other imperfections it may labour under, cannot juſtly be accuſed of being governed by a ſpirit of perſecution. It may be lukewarm, but it has never been intolerant. Of the ſpirit of Popery it is unneceſſary to ſpeak. Experience, whoſe deciſions can never be controverted, has exhibited it in its native colours. Cruel and deceitful,—turbulent and faithleſs,—blind and oppreſſive; its character is now ſo well known, that it ſcarcely finds

finds an enlightened adherent in this enlightened country.

The Proteſtant Diſſenters, who are ſufficiently numerous at preſent, and not likely to be leſs ſo, may perhaps be ſurpriſed to be told, that in many particulars, a fatal reſemblance ſubſiſts between them and their deteſted rivals:—if a fallen ſect may be called the rivals of a riſing one. Extremes have a tendency to meet. The ſame bold deſigns, the ſame artful conduct, the ſame inveterate animoſity, the ſame unwearied exertions to make proſelytes, the ſame unjuſtifiable attempts to intimidate thoſe whom they cannot perſuade, which once characterized the Papiſt, are now transferred to the Diſſenter. With toleration in his mouth, and perſecution in his heart, the ſectariſt, who in his writings and his converſation ſtands forth as the advocate of the rights of mankind, forgets them in his practice. In his family, no freedom of opinion is allowed: in his commerce with the world, no protection or countenance is afforded to thoſe who are of a different perſuaſion. His ſervants, in whatever religious principles they have been bred, are ſeduced or forced to the conventicle; and if he would not forego the neceſſaries, he would at leaſt relinquiſh many of the comforts of life, rather than purchaſe them of a churchman. From his domeſtic conduct, we may form ſome idea of what his public

principles

principles would be, ſhould the mutability of human affairs lodge power in his hands. This is no vain ſpeculation, no declamatory invective. We have ſeen the Preſbyterians and other ſectariſts in power, and whoever wiſhes to know their real ſentiments, on the ſubject of *toleration*, may find them faithfully depicted by a hand, whoſe repreſentations I ſhould ſuppoſe they were unwilling to contradict;—I mean *their own*. If we turn to the celebrated ordinance which was paſſed 23d Auguſt 1645, and was continued in force till the Reſtoration, we ſhall find it there enacted, that to preach, write or print any thing in derogation, or depraving the directory for the then eſtabliſhed Preſbyterian worſhip, ſubjected the offender upon an indictment to a diſcretionary fine, not exceeding *fifty pounds*; and moreover, by the ſame ordinance, was inflicted *impriſonment for a year* on the third offence, and pecuniary penalties on the former two, in caſe of uſing the Book of Common Prayer, not only in a place of public worſhip, but alſo in any *private family!* An ordinance dictated by the genius of *Popery*, and worthy of the Inquiſition in the moſt barbarous times!

The apologiſts for the Diſſenters will probably obſerve, that the ſentiments of the party are at preſent of a more liberal caſt. Perhaps they may be ſo; for they are not in power. But were they

they at this moment elevated to the ſtation they then poſſeſſed, they give us too much reaſon to fear, that the tyranny and intolerance which are now confined to their families, would again be extended to the nation at large. It is not from profeſſions that we muſt judge of the integrity or deſigns of men. We muſt mark their conduct, and ſee to what objects it tends.

That of the Diſſenters, at preſent, wears a more open and decided air than they are accuſtomed to aſſume. The public prints are crouded with their advertiſements, complaining of grievances which do not exiſt, and demanding privileges to which they have no pretenſions. To men who claim imaginary rights, it is a ſufficient anſwer to oppoſe rights that are real. It has been obſerved, by one of the firſt and moſt diſintereſted lawyers* this country has ever produced, that "the civil magiſtrate is bound to protect the "eſtabliſhed church; and if this can be better "effected, by admitting none but its genuine "members to offices of truſt and emolument, he "is certainly at liberty ſo to do; the diſpoſal of "offices being matter of *favour and diſcretion.*" With reſpect to the nature of the teſt required, it muſt appear to every unprejudiced mind, that a religious teſt is the ſureſt and moſt proper criterion of religious principles. Notwithſtanding

* Sir William Blackſtone.

the

the loud and illiberal invectives of the Diſſenters, there is nothing indecent or improper, no wanton prophanation of a ſacred rite, in making it neceſſary to partake of it, as a qualification for a civil office. It is no more than requiring a ſolemn pledge, from the perſon to be inveſted with magiſtracy or public employment, of his ſincere attachment to the national church. As a member of that church, he is bound by every tie of decency and conſcience, frequently to aſſiſt at the communion. Of his motives, it is not the province of man to judge. Nor is it fair or candid to ſuppoſe that he never communicates, except when it is neceſſary as a legal qualification. The Legiſlature, in erecting this bulwark againſt Papiſts, and other ſectariſts, was not perhaps aware, that there exiſted men baſe enough to mock heaven, for the ſake of deceiving their country *. *Occaſional conformity*, which to the diſgrace

* The following authentic anecdote, though perhaps foreign to the argument, may ſerve to illuſtrate the ſentiments of ſome of the diſſenting clergy, I hope not all of them, on the ſubject of *occaſional conformity*. In the ancient and religious corporation of Br — t—l, every body knows there are ſome members who have a little bias towards the *conventicle*. Not many years ago, it happened that theſe gentlemen had a particular point to carry, which made it expedient for them to have a mayor of their own party. The perſon choſen for this purpoſe, though deſirous of ſerving the cauſe, by ſome unlucky accident had *real* ſcruples of conſcience about qualifying. In this dilemma, he applied to the teacher of the congregation he frequented, for advice. The paſtor,

grace of the Diſſenters, originated among themſelves, is one of the moſt abject, the moſt infamous, the moſt blaſphemous proſtitutions of conſcience at the ſhrine of ambition, that the annals of human wickedneſs can boaſt. Yet if we allow ourſelves to argue againſt the uſe of things from their abuſe, where ſhall we draw the line? Oaths may be called the occaſion of perjury,—laws of crimes,—religion of hypocriſy and impiety. But ſhall we therefore reject the ſecurity of oaths, the protection of laws, and the benefits of religion?

The Diſſenters ſeem particularly anxious to aſſure us, that no danger is to be apprehended to the State, from admitting them to a free participation of public offices. But it is abſurd to intruſt any ſet of men with power upon their ſimple aſſurance that they do not intend to abuſe

paſtor, being one of thoſe, who in their generation are wiſer than the children of light, aſſured his diſciple that he might very ſafely communicate with the Church of England, without violating his principles or injuring his conſcience. He ſupported his aſſertion with ſuch ſtrong arguments as in the end prevailed. The magiſtrate qualified, the point agitated in the corporation was carried; but at the expiration of his office he neglected to return to the meeting. Alarmed at the deſertion, the pious paſtor again conferred with his former diſciple, and endeavoured to unwind the arguments he had before ſo ingeniouſly woven, but in vain: the ſolid reaſons he alleged in his firſt converſation prevailed over the ſophiſtry of the ſecond, and he was never able to recover the loſt ſheep.

it. The public has a right to demand ſtronger pledges of their fidelity. When a ſectariſt declares, as they affect to declare with much ſolemnity in their pompous advertiſements, that he is a friend to the conſtitution, he either deceives himſelf, or utters a groſs falſehood. Our eccleſiaſtical and civil eſtabliſhment are ſo indiſſolubly blended, that it is impoſſible to ſeparate them without injury to both. He, therefore, who is inimical to the Church, cannot be friendly to the State: and ſince the King is the head of the Church, cannot be friendly to the King. Of the zeal of the Diſſenters for the *good* of their country we have ample proofs, when we recollect who it was that projected, ſupported, and compleated the *Grand Rebellion*,—who it was that voted the Houſe of Peers uſeleſs,—brought their monarch to the ſcaffold,—and the nation to diſgrace. Of their loyalty, their boaſted loyalty to the Houſe of Brunſwick who can doubt, that remembers the induſtry with which they fomented the revolt of the Americans, the arguments they ſupplied, and the intelligence with which they furniſhed them?—It was the loyal, the dutiful, the liberal Diſſenters and their adherents, who to gratify their malevolence, aſſiſted the enemies of their country in diſmembering the empire. Yet theſe are the men who ſolemnly aſſure us*, "that

* See Reſolutions of the Proteſtant Diſſenters, at Exeter, 1 October, 1789.

"they

" they maintain no principles, and have done
" nothing, as a body, that can juſtly render
" them unworthy the confidence of Government,
" that they have ever been zealouſly attached to
" the civil conſtitution of their country, which
" they have always been forward to defend
" whenever it has been in danger; and are, and
" ever have been, ſtrenuous ſupporters of all
" the Princes of the royal Houſe of Brunſ-
" wick."

It is one of their favourite topics of complaint, that the excluſion from public offices, on account of their refuſal to comply with the teſt, is a mark of diſgrace. If it be ſo, it may afford them ſome conſolation to reflect that they ſhare it in common with the heirs to his Majeſty's throne, which, as the law now ſtands, they can never aſcend till they have given the ſame public teſtimony of their religious principles.

But while a wounded conſcience and inſulted feelings are the ſpecious pretences, ambition and enmity to the eſtabliſhed church are the real cauſes that ſtimulate their exertions. Our indolence and their activity may one day prove fatal to the eccleſiaſtical conſtitution. Animated by a ſpirit of unwearied perſeverence, they depend no leſs for ſucceſs upon their own ſtrength, than

upon the ſupport of thoſe careleſs or diſaffected members of the church, whom they are able to cajole or blind by liberal promiſes and artful profeſſions. They know but too well that in great and difficult enterprizes it is neceſſary to encounter obſtacles ſingly, and in ſucceſſion; that they ſhould neither be intimidated by their number nor their magnitude; that it is a weakneſs to deſpair of accompliſhing whatever lies within the bounds of poſſibility; and that many of thoſe things which appear impracticable to a ſuperficial obſerver, are eaſily attained by thoſe who have ſufficient judgment and ſkill to take advantage of times and opportunity, to profit by their own vigilance and the overſights of their adverſary. In every conteſt minorities poſſeſs ſome advantages which an able leader will turn to good account. They move with unanimity and deciſion, their deſigns are fixed, their reſolution formed before they begin to act; while that ſide which boaſts ſuperior ſtrength of numbers, is tempted by that very circumſtance to ſink into negligence and ſecurity.

That the Sectariſts of the preſent day have formed ſome deep * and extenſive project, is evident

* Among the many ſymptoms which indicate a ſettled plan of innovation, we may reckon the new Academical Inſtitution in

dent from the honeſt, but perhaps injudicious and premature declaration of Dr. Prieſtly: that apoſtle of civil and religious confuſion aſſures them, "that their ſilent propagation of the truth, "would in the end prove efficacious; that they "were wiſely placing as it were grain by grain a "train of gunpowder, to which the match would "one day be laid, to blow up the *fabric of error*, "which could never be again raiſed on the ſame "foundation." From his conduct and that of his partizans, there is every reaſon to ſuppoſe, that by the fabric of error is meant the Church of England; and, to purſue the Doctor's metaphor, which by the way is rather unhappily choſen from the Gunpowder Plot, the repeal of the Corporation and Teſt Acts, ſeems the moſt effectual mode of applying the match to the train. Should they ever be enabled to accompliſh that point, the Church "may bid a long farewel to all its greatneſs." The period they have choſen for their exertions is ſelected with great judgment. As the preſent Parliament is haſtening to its diſſolution, they muſt uſe every endeavour to procure in the next a majority of members pro-

in the neighbourhood of London; which however laudable in itſelf, could we conſider it merely as an attempt to introduce a better ſyſtem of education, ſhould, on account of its obvious political tendency, be regarded by government with a vigilant, and even jealous eye.

pitious

pitious to their principles, their projects, and their wiſhes. The meetings which they have formed in every part of the kingdom, the regular correſpondence maintained between theſe provincial aſſemblies and that which is held in the metropolis, the repeated aſſertions of their determination not to give their ſupport to any candidates but thoſe who will pledge themſelves to vote for the repeal of the obnoxious acts, are plain proofs of their reſolution to try their ſtrength at the enſuing election. So far at leaſt their conduct has the merit of being open and manly; yet it ſeems extraordinary that the profeſſed advocates of civil liberty ſhould eſtabliſh one teſt while they are endeavouring to procure the repeal of another. That they will be ſucceſsful in ſome part of the kingdom, principally in the cities and boroughs, is highly probable; in thoſe ſeats of opulence and ſchiſm their ſtrength principally lies. Men who have been bred to trade, particularly the inferior branches of it, are very apt to become latitudinarians in the Church, and levellers in the State. Deteſting thoſe diſtinctions to which they were not born, and envying that independence which they have never enjoyed, they ſeek for every opportunity of mortifying the great, and reducing the clergy to the precarious ſubſiſtance of voluntary contribution. Modern philoſophy indeed, boaſts much

of

of the liberality of ſentiment diffuſed by commerce, but ſpeculative philoſophers are not always the beſt judges of fact; and perhaps the picture drawn by the elegant author of the following lines, though not a flattering likeneſs, is very near the truth:

" Now more deſtructive than a blighting ſtorm,
" A bloated monſter, Commerce, rears her form;
" Throws the meek olive from her daring hand,
" Graſps the red ſword, and whirls the flaming
" brand;
" *True to no faith, by no reſtraints controul'd*;
" By guilt made cautious, and by avarice bold.
" Can this be ſhe, who promis'd once to bind
" In leagues of laſting amity, mankind?
" *This fiend, whoſe breath inflames the ſpark of ſtrife,*
" And pays with trivial joys the price of life?"

But I truſt, that even among the commercial world, among the buſy haunts of men, there is ſtill a large majority attached to our church from principle and conviction. They who are really ſo, and warmed with an honeſt zeal for the proſperity of their country and their religion, will not ſhrink from the preſent conteſt, but will reſolutely accept the challenge which the ſectariſts have hurled in their teeth.

The landed intereſt and the clergy are bound by the ties of prudence, as well as thoſe of duty,

to

to ſummon all their powers to the conteſt. Let them remember, that a houſe divided againſt itſelf cannot ſtand. While the advocates of a bad cauſe are diſtinguiſhed for their unanimity, their vigour and perſeverence, it will be doubly diſgraceful for thoſe who are the patrons of a good one, to be deficient in thoſe requiſites from which alone it can hope for ſupport. Should they ſuffer the preſent opportunity to eſcape, it will never return. They may lament thoſe evils which they cannot remedy, and rue the fatal hour when they ſurrendered their liberties and their conſciences into the hands of thoſe, who under the maſk of friendſhip betrayed them to their ruin. If the Diſſenters gain a majority in the enſuing Parliament, what ſecurity remains for the national religion? Should they act as honeſt men, they will be deſirous of eſtabliſhing that mode of faith which they believe to be the beſt; —and ſhould they act otherwiſe, to what exceſſes may they not proceed? Even now, we find them reſtleſs, intriguing and aſpiring. Enjoying every indulgence, civil and religious, that reaſonable men can require, it is *the ſpirit of ambition* that beckons them on to bolder undertakings, it is *the ſpirit of ambition* that prompts them to aim at obtaining an influence in Parliament, and to ſeek dominion while they pretend to aſk redreſs.

Whatever

Whatever may be the event in the Houſe of Commons, we have fortunately other reſources left. The hereditary counſellors of the crown do not depend for their exiſtence on the ſuffrages of the people; they muſt have little wiſdom or little ſpirit if they ſubmit to become the tools of a party which ſtill abhor, and once annihilated their order. Equally enlightened, and in ſome reſpects more independent than the Commons, they will be enabled to ſtem the torrent of popular phrenzy. From the example of France they have received a leſſon which muſt ſink deep into their hearts; from the diſtractions of that unhappy country they have learnt the neceſſity of reſiſting every ſtep that may tend, however remotely, to hazard the degradation of their dignity. When the nobility and clergy of that once flouriſhing country, ſo far forgot their rank, as to ſubmit to ſit in the aſſembly, and be melted into the maſs of the Commons, they threw down the laſt barrier of the ancient conſtitution. Should the temporal and ſpiritual peers of this country conſent to the repeal of the Corporation and Teſt Acts, they will be guilty of a ſimilar error. By admitting Diſſenters of every deſcription into the offices of ſtate, they will transfer the power from their own hands into thoſe of their bittereſt enemies, and ſow the ſeeds of ſome future, though not diſtant revolution.

But ſhould the peers be tempted to ſacrifice the intereſts of their country to the dread of cenſure and invective,—ſhould they compliment away the conſtitution, of which we are now ſo juſtly proud, for fear of incurring the odium of thoſe who feel intereſted in its deſtruction,—if his Majeſty has one miniſter about his court who feels a ſpark of patriotiſm or an emotion of religion, he will adviſe and implore his ſovereign to reſcue us from ruin, by interpoſing his negative. For the miſguided monarch, if ſuch a monarch ſhould ever ariſe, who ſhall be prevailed upon to give his aſſent to the repeal of the Corporation and Teſt Acts, will feel the crown ſliding from his brow, and precipitate the ſceptre from the hands of his deſcendants.

This may appear harſh language, but it is the language of truth. In ſubmitting theſe ſentiments to the public, I am well aware that I ſhall incur the hatred of many, and the cenſure of more. To hatred or to cenſure I am by no means callous: but my ſenſe of duty is ſtronger than my fears. I feel that the welfare of my country which I love, of the church to which I am attached from conviction, is at ſtake. Conſcious that my voice is feeble, yet under ſuch circumſtances, I ſhould deem it criminal to be ſilent. Should I be fortunate enough at this important

portant criſis to call the attention of my countrymen to an object, on which the future ſtability of the conſtitution depends, I ſhall feel a ſatisfaction which criticiſm cannot deprive me of, nor panygeric beſtow.

F I N I S.

E R R A T A.

Page.	*Line.*	*For*	*Read*
9	9	Of all outrages,	Of all the outrages.
21	3	apoſtle of civil and religious confuſion,	active and inveterate enemy of our eſtabliſhment.
22	17	part,	parts.
23	18	among,	in.

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